

SINGING CAREER—1924-1955

“Nelson can’t carry a tune.” So answered my mother when Maestro Edgar Fowlston asked her if I might be interested in joining the boys choir that he was organizing at Trinity Episcopal Church, Mount Vernon, New York. Mr. Fowlston was from Sheffield, England, and had come to Mount Vernon via an intermediate appointment at a church in Toronto, Canada. He was in the process of building up the finest choir of men and boys that Mount Vernon had ever heard. He had a tremendous knowledge of sacred music, an appreciation of the science of voice production, especially in adolescent boys, and an ability to control an obstreperous bunch of young singers. All of this was unknown to us at the time of his question to my mother (1924) but would become evident in due course. I was eight years old. Mr. Fowlston brushed aside my mother’s response and assured her that he would have me singing solos in church by the age of 10. That is what actually transpired, although I had to share the role at first on a rotatory basis with two of his sons, Charles and Dalton, who were also boy sopranos. The established soprano soloist when I first joined the choir was John Gaunt, who had a remarkable high range and great projection, but successors had to be trained to replace him when his voice would change. I became soprano soloist in 1928.

The rehearsals for the boys were held at 4:00 p.m. on Mondays and Wednesdays and for the full choir on Friday nights. This routine became part of my life. We were paid a small sum each week, but this amount was subject to subtraction for absence, lateness, or disruptive behavior. At each rehearsal, we would receive training in voice production, sight reading, and, of course, staying on pitch. I thrived on the learning of new music, the comradeship, and the competition. Mr. Fowlston also generously gave us group singing lessons and, as we developed, individual singing lessons. His wife, Gladys Fowlston, was occasionally our accompanist during those lessons in which we studied secular as well as sacred music. I began to accumulate a library of sheet music and cantata and oratorio music. I could practice regularly at home, where my mother was my competent accompanist—as long as the piece did not contain too many sharps! It was a little different at school. My homeroom teachers

complained that I sang too loud when there was group singing. My enthusiastic participation was therefore funneled into glee club concerts and, from those, into operetta productions.

My mother and I played and sang for my father and any guests after we had mastered several musical selections that seemed to fit together. We performed for the family, including my grandmother, uncles, aunts, and guests at Thanksgiving and Christmas. If not a command, at least it was an expected performance, and it was good experience for appearance before larger audiences. My mother taught me a valuable principle. It was to sing my very best no matter the size of the audience or the place of performance. "Always give it your very best," and "Sing as though you are on the stage of Carnegie Hall." It is indeed important to strive for a professional level on all occasions; then, there is no confusion as to what a singer is trying to project and there is a repeatable basis for self-satisfaction.

By 1929, when I was 12 and the economy was overheating, I was able to obtain some solo engagements in other churches, even some in New Jersey, including the church in which my parents were married. The guest appearances were tolerated by Mr. Fowlston as long as the program indicated that I was trained by him and as long as I could be absent on a particular Sunday (two services) from Trinity Church. The most I ever earned on a Sunday away was \$12.50, but that was a worthwhile sum in 1929. After the market crash in October of that year, however, the guest appearances ceased. What I earned as a choir boy in Trinity I put into savings (one-half) and back into music (one-half) in some form.

In 1930, two events changed the course of my choir career. At 13, about to be 14, I had earned my place as the number one soprano soloist, when Mr. Fowlston imported a younger boy into the choir. Michael Rotando had a natural, rich, high soprano voice. It was a more romantic and appealing voice than the rather straight, Anglo voice that had resulted from my background and training. What a blow, just when I had achieved a dominant position! Mr. Fowlston sensed my discontent and offered a solution. He said that in his experience, when the voice of a boy soprano "breaks," it is problematic whether he can be a fine singer thereafter. He would like to try the experiment of training my voice downward in pitch to an alto range. This, he felt, would avoid the usual "break," and further maturation and training could bring the range further down to tenor, baritone, or bass, according to where it would eventually settle. I trusted his judgment and happily, although not at first, became his alto soloist for all of my high school years, that is, 1930-1933. Michael and I sang well together. I came to appreciate his natural musicianship, and we enjoyed

each other's company. We had many singing engagements during the three-year period in addition to the usual solos and duets in church.

The other remarkable event of 1930 was a change of church. Mr. Fowlston was offered the choir directorship of the Chester Hill Methodist Episcopal Church, Mount Vernon, which had no choir before that. He was given carte blanche to recruit, and he recruited about half of Trinity's members, Michael and me among them, at a raise in pay. This sounds sort of crass, but a new Rector had come to Trinity, and the relationship between priest and choir had lost some of its common purpose. The people of the Chester Hill church welcomed us with great enthusiasm, and we enjoyed singing in the more visible and responsive surroundings. That is, there was no chancel as such, so we performed facing the congregation. As choir boys, we could not help but notice that the girls in the congregation were prettier in the new church. We had the opportunity of meeting them at the Young People's Fellowship which met on Sunday evenings, and we occasionally went on ice skating parties. My most important new friend at Chester Hill was Morton Sultzter, who was to play an important role in the life of the Leonard family and in my scholastic career. The rehearsal times for the boys and for the full choir remained the same. Whereas Trinity Church was next door, the Chester Hill Church was a mile away. It wasn't so inconvenient, however, because it was fairly close to the Mount Vernon High School and I could walk there easily at the end of my final study period of the day. A pair of buses would cover the distances when the weather was foul. The change was good for me, although it did alter my parents' Sunday habits, as I described in the chapter devoted to them.

During the summer of 1933, before I attended Lehigh University, I took voice lessons with Mr. Fowlston, for which I had to pay out of savings, as he guided my voice range downward in the tenor clef. At Lehigh, I sang first tenor in the glee club while still singing alto in the choir of the Pro Cathedral Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania. T. Edgar Shields was the director of the glee club and organist and choirmaster at the church. He was aware of my abilities and my limitations; thus, I had the best possible musical experience. Finally, in the summer following my sophomore year, my voice had finally settled into the baritone range without a break, just as Fowlston had predicted five years earlier. During my last two years at Lehigh, I sang first bass in both the glee club and church choir and had some solo occasions. Original musicals that our acting club, Mustard and Cheese, presented in 1936 and 1937 were great fun. I sang a role in each of these, but the main lead went to a tenor each time. Female players and singers were imported from the local women's colleges. The director was Al Rights, who demanded and got the best out of us. We

would do anything for him. My classmate Harold Towne organized a double quartet. We sang at alumni gatherings in Philadelphia, Baltimore, and New York, and over the radio in those cities where our studio time was paid for by local alumni.



NJL with Edgar Fowlston, voice coach

I was back with Edgar Fowlston as a teacher in the summer of 1937. Since I was working that summer at Bell Research Laboratories in New York, I could afford to pay for one lesson a week—on range, color, projection, and repertoire. I felt fairly well prepared musically when I went off to Oxford that fall. Music in Oxford has been covered systematically in the chapter on *The Oxford Years, 1937-1939*. Upon my return, I visited Fowlston again, who had progressed to having a studio in the upper reaches of Carnegie Hall. However, I felt that he had provided me with about everything he knew and I therefore

postponed further voice lessons. In the meantime, his wife Gladys Fowlston acted as a volunteer agent for me and secured an audition with Harold Friedel, organist and choirmaster at Calvary Episcopal Church on Fourth Avenue (now called South Park Avenue), New York City. Luckily, I was hired as a paid choir member and had three years of excellent musical experience. The bass-baritone soloist was so good that I only got to sing solos when he was absent or when, in Sunday evening cantatas and oratorios that we presented, two bass solo voices were needed. Friedel was a composer of religious music that is still performed. He was also a terrific organist. It became my habit, following his initial request, to turn pages for him when he played the postlude in Sunday services. Through that contact I heard a fair amount of the organ literature. I also seemed to have become well acquainted with his technique. Here is the story. After 1942, I did not visit Calvary Church nor did I hear from him again. However, in the spring of 1947, when I was showing Nell around New York, we stopped in to see the interior of beautiful St. Bartholomew's Church on Park Avenue (the real Park Avenue). The organ was being played with great spirit. As I listened, I blurted out, "That has got to be Harold Friedel!" Indeed it was. He had moved uptown to one of the best jobs in New York City. Unfortunately, it was not to last very long.

He had a heart attack while shoveling snow after a blizzard only a few years later.

Every singer needs a vocal teacher. It is never safe to rely upon one's past training and current habits. Each teacher can bring about an improvement. I found a new teacher in Hunter Kimball, an established voice teacher with a studio on East 72nd Street, located conveniently near a subway stop. After I had worked with him for a few weeks, I took along to the next lesson one of the Calvary choir members so that she could give me her judgment as to whether Kimball was the right teacher for me. Her answer was positive, and I stayed with him for almost three years. As I think back on the experience now, I believe he helped me most with good projection at the piano or pianissimo level and a bit rounder tone. I couldn't afford, however, the frequency of lessons that he preferred. Where did I practice? When I went home to Mount Vernon on certain weekends, quietly in my room in John Jay Hall, in the laboratory if I was the first arrival, and out of the open door at the rear of any subway train that I rode. That would not be possible today because standing on the rear platform would be considered unsafe. I could always "read" the music even when I couldn't sing out. Music kept me on an even plane during the bumpy course of graduate research for the Ph.D.

It was when I went to the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign that musical opportunities really developed. I started singing in the University Choir and taking voice lessons with Bruce Foote. Russell Miles was the director of the U. of I. Choir and a professor of organ. When I took a Sunday off from research, I would take a long walk and also listen to one of his regular organ recitals. There was not very much else to do in the center of Illinois. By the spring of my first year at Illinois, 1942-1943, my singing was known well enough that Professor Miles asked me to appear with him in one of his organ recitals. I sang two of the "Four Serious Songs" of Brahms, accompanied on the piano by Grace Wilson. At that time, Grace was an assistant professor of voice and was also generous with her time as an accompanist. Bruce Foote was a competent and amusing voice teacher, but he was better known for his professional singing. I substituted for him as a paid soloist in June of 1943 when the First Presbyterian Church of Springfield, Illinois—Abraham Lincoln's church—presented the Brahms's "Requiem." I was surprised that the *Illinois State Journal and Record* covered the church performance including,

"Nelson Leonard, University of Illinois, contributed tones of resonance and warmth to the baritone solo lines."

Bruce Foote was not only generous in suggesting my substitution for him, but he must have coached me well because, from that time forward, I became the invited bass-baritone soloist at First Presbyterian's special evensongs. Harry J. Tomlinson, Jr., who was the organist and choirmaster, became a good friend. I enjoyed singing under his direction a wide variety of cantatas and oratorios, including Haydn's "Creation," Handel's "Messiah," Bach's "St. Matthew Passion," Mendelssohn's "Elijah," and Bach's "Mass in B Minor." In the 1940s, it was easy to travel between Urbana and Springfield by an interurban railway ("light rail") and the Tomlinsons would put me up after the rehearsal on the Saturday night before each concert. I also sang solos for Lanson Demming, who was the organist and choirmaster of the University Place Christian Church in Champaign.

By 1945, I was ready for recitals; one of duets and solos at the University of Illinois with Grace Wilson, with Professor Jane Watt as the accompanist, and another at the Illinois Wesleyan Junior College of Music in Springfield, with Harry Tomlinson as accompanist and co-recitalist. We had a small but loyal following in both Champaign and Springfield. When Bruce Foote went on leave to sing professionally, Professor LeRoy Hamp became my singing teacher for the next 10 years. He was an excellent and demanding teacher, with constructive ideas about how I might advance my singing career. One of his ideas was that I should audition for Edgar Nelson, Director of the Apollo Musical Club. Located in Chicago, the Club was the oldest choral organization in the Midwest and certainly the best in those years. The designated audition day was not without difficulties. On the ride to Chicago on the Illinois Central Railroad in an old coach, I managed to transfer some oily material to my light tan gaberdine suit. What to do? I bought a small bottle of cleaning fluid and retreated to one of the lakeside parks. Several applications of fluid with a small towel, also purchased, did a fair job, and my sitting patiently in the sun allowed the residual liquid to evaporate after each application. After a time, I was sufficiently dry-cleaned, although not pressed! A walk in the park and a brief visit to the Chicago Art Institute restored my pleasant anticipation of the forthcoming audition. When I appeared before Edgar Nelson and his committee, I didn't feel nervous but I felt eager. However, my knees were shaking. It was lucky that the pant legs were wide, which was the style in 1944, so that the shaking was not visible to the listeners. I sang one of the bass solos from Bach's "Mass in B Minor" with some passion, reminding myself of Hamp's advice, "When you sing this, remember that Bach had 22 children." The audition was successful, and Edgar Nelson was almost apologetic that I would be hired to sing Satan in César Franck's

“The Beatitudes,” promising that the Club would be expecting me to participate in a Bach program the following year.

LeRoy Hamp obtained a very important job for me in September, 1945. It was to sing in the main Rosh Hashanah service of the Washington Boulevard Reformed Synagogue in Chicago. LeRoy, who was to play the organ for that service, taught me the major Hebraic selections that I would be required to sing, and I was coached further by a professional cantor from Vienna (originally) who was to sing the holiday service in Rockefeller Chapel of the University of Chicago. We added a selection from Elijah as a voluntary: “Lord God of Abraham.” After the service, the rabbi took me by the shoulders and said, with enthusiasm, “You are more Jewish than we are!” It was probably the finest compliment on my singing that I had ever received. He had tears in his eyes, and I had tears in mine. During 1945 especially, we had been learning the full extent of the persecution and slaughter of the Jews by the Nazis. Later that September, I started my service with Field Intelligence Agency Technical of the U.S. Army in Europe, returning in February, 1946, to continue with my chemistry and music.

The April 1946 dress rehearsal and performance of Franck’s “The Beatitudes” were exciting for me. The other soloists and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra responded well to the direction of Edgar Nelson, but the composition is a bit dated. Two things happened to me as the result of my appearance and Albert Goldberg’s review in *The Chicago Tribune*, which concluded with:

“A young bass, Nelson Leonard, put vim and vigor behind a promising voice but directed his performance entirely to his tightly clutched music book.”

Wow! My only explanation was that Mr. Goldberg, as critic, had been sitting in the first or second row of the orchestra and thus effectively under my score, which I was holding straight out while I directed my voice to the first balcony (Orchestra Hall is a tall structure). The quote was valuable to me just as long as I ended it before “but.” The agent for the Chicago Symphony, Howard Will, who heard the concert, said he was willing to be *my* agent if I would learn my roles by heart or at least hold my score down in a more relaxed position. He did, in fact, obtain some good jobs for me and received 20% of each singing fee. And I followed his directive!

My singing activity picked up from the time of the Apollo Musical Club appearance. Harry Tomlinson, who had changed his position to the

Normal Park Presbyterian Church in Chicago, enlisted me to join him for an organ and solo recital in May, 1946, and to be soloist in their production of "Elijah" on October 6. Arriving in time for the rehearsal the day before was a bit hectic. I had spent a consulting day at Phillips Petroleum Company in Bartlesville, Oklahoma; my commercial flight from Tulsa to St. Louis was on time, but a sudden airline strike grounded me there. I wandered over to the private aircraft section of the terminal and found a pilot who was going to Chicago. He was more interested in recruiting young female passengers, but I talked him into allowing me to ride in the fourth seat. I was proud of my ingenuity in reaching Midway Airport in good time for the Saturday rehearsal, but the other musicians took it as a matter of course that we would all be assembled at the assigned hour. It is a "given" that if you arrive somewhere on time, or perhaps even late, your friends who meet you there are not so interested in the details of your travel.

My next "Elijah" was sung in Midland, Michigan, with Theodore Vosburgh conducting the Midland Choral Society, Dow Mixed Chorus, and the Dow Symphony Orchestra in two performances in December, 1946. John Toms was the tenor soloist. Some 20 years later, there was an Ann Toms in my class in organic chemistry at the University of Illinois. The name was unusual enough that I asked whether the singer was her father. Indeed, he was. Marjorie Johnson, writing broadly enthusiastically in the *Midland Daily News*, gave me a very useful quote:

"In the singing of Nelson Leonard, who represented the character of 'Elijah,' the audience heard a dramatic bass baritone whose tone and clear enunciation highlighted the performance. Leonard brought exceptional feeling to the quiet and dramatic 'It Is Enough'."

In January, 1947, I sang a second recital at the University of Illinois with Grace Wilson, with Jane Watt as accompanist. These recitals evolved into annual events, so that we covered a wide range of music and were well supported by the students and staff of the Music School, along with some loyal chemists and physicists. Nell was scheduled to arrive in New York on February 11, and I asked permission from Roger Adams, Head of our Department of Chemistry and Chemical Engineering, to be away from the U. of I. He agreed that I *had* to meet her since she was my fiancée and was coming to the U.S.A. for the first time. When he learned that I had substitute lecturers in place for my intended absence, he gave his permission. As I was going out the door of his office, quite satisfied, Dr. Adams called me back. As Chairman of the Program Committee of the

Urbana Rotary Club, he wondered whether I would be available in March to sing at one of their luncheons. You can bet that I made myself available. Unfortunately, Adams was out of town on the occasion.

When I was asked to perform in the First Bach Festival in Kalamazoo, Michigan, February 27—March 5, 1947, I indicated that I would like to bring along my fiancée, newly arrived from the Netherlands, as a guest. Kalamazoo is in the heart of the Michigan area where immigrants from Holland had first settled. Nell was welcomed with open arms and was kept so busy being entertained that I saw very little of her in Kalamazoo. I stayed with the Davis family and she stayed with the Meyer family. They were enthusiastic supporters of the festival. The contralto soloist was Lilian Knowles, wife of the conductor of the famous Bethlehem Bach Choir. She assailed me when we appeared for the first rehearsal, “When did you sing with the Bethlehem Bach Choir?” Those, indeed, were the words that had wandered through the newspapers, from an earlier entry, which described Nelson Leonard as a soloist who was to appear in the concert. I had paid no attention to any advance notices. The original wording that I had provided somewhere along the line, “(NL) has sung with T. Edgar Shields, Organist of the Bethlehem Bach Choir,” was apparently too obtuse to have been used. It was also factual but potentially misleading. After I had gotten over the mini-trauma of the confrontation, we proceeded with rehearsals. Harold Haugh, from the University of Michigan School of Music, who was the solo tenor, was a great musician with an impressive voice. I was to become a co-soloist again with Harold and Lilian, and she changed from “critic” to “fan.” Beth Sebalý of the *Kalamazoo Gazette*, in describing Bach’s “The Passion According to St. Matthew” as performed in the chapel of Kalamazoo College, wrote:

“Singing the words of Judas, Peter, Caiaphas, and Pilate was the demanding responsibility of Dr. Nelson Leonard, bass baritone. His sensitive interpretation of the many roles is the obvious result of successful experience in singing the ‘Passion’.”

Henry Overley, who was the Director of the Bach Festival, wrote me a very appreciative letter after he had listened to a recording of the performance and had tabulated the results of the questionnaire he had sent out to chorus members and patrons. I appeared again under Henry Overley’s direction in the Second and Fourth Annual Kalamazoo Bach Festivals. In their second “St. Matthew Passion,” I sang the role of Christ, chronicled in the *Kalamazoo Gazette* of March 16, 1948:

“Nelson Leonard’s mellow tones and absorbed, devout attitude towards his part were notable in interpreting the words of Christ.”

The program of the Fourth Festival included Bach’s “B Minor Mass.”

Back in the spring of 1947, Nell heard me sing in the University of Illinois performance of the “St. Matthew Passion,” in which my voice teachers LeRoy Hamp and Bruce Foote were co-soloists. Nell and I were together for the 75th anniversary performance of the Apollo Musical Club in Orchestra Hall, Chicago, where I sang the bass solos in the “B Minor Mass.” The date, May 8, 1947, made our lives a bit hectic. We flew out of Chicago after the performance on a midnight plane that made two stops on its way to New York, and we were married in Bronxville on the morning of May 10. An overnight train brought us back to Urbana-Champaign in time for a party at the home of Roger and Lucile Adams on May 11 and a return to teaching for me on May 12. The next “B Minor Mass” was sung in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, in 1948 with the Arion Musical Club under the direction of Hermann Nott, with good response from R.L.F. in the *Milwaukee Sentinel*:

“A good sized audience listened with respect for sincerity of both the chorus and the soloists, among whom Nelson Leonard, bass of Urbana, Ill., was outstanding.

“Leonard’s voice has both depth and fervor. He was particularly effective in the air, ‘For Thou Only Art Holy.’ His voice has an heroic quality.”

Perhaps I was reflecting exuberance at the imminent birth of the first member of the family. Kenneth was born just 11 days after that performance. I enjoyed filling the Milwaukee Auditorium (or at least half of it, because it was shortened in length by a huge hanging curtain) with my voice. William Miller, who was the tenor soloist, would be joining the voice faculty of the University of Illinois, and I could attest to his high quality as a singer and sympathetic artist.

There were other performances of the “St. Matthew Passion” in Severance Hall, Cleveland, Ohio, under the direction of Walter Blodgett, Curator of Musical Arts of the Cleveland Museum of Art; at Miami University, Oxford, Ohio, under the direction of Leigh Gerdine; in Orchestra Hall with the Apollo Musical Club and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Henry Veld; and at Drake University,

Des Moines, Iowa, under the direction of Stanford Hulshizer. The press notices were very satisfying. The performance with my friend Leigh Gerdine generated a letter from Gordon Sutherland, Dean of the School of Fine Arts of Miami University, that I am not too embarrassed to quote in part:

"Last year I was grateful to you for your performance in the Brahms Requiem. This year I am even deeper in your debt for your Christus in the St. Matthew Passion. The debt is personal as well as official, since this was by all odds the most superb performance of the part that it has ever been my privilege to hear. You made it what it should be—both an aesthetic and a spiritual experience of the highest order."

I treasured his letter (April 17, 1950) because he was not only a Dean; he happened to be an authority on Bach. In Des Moines, I was surprised to learn at the dress rehearsal that I was expected to sing all of the music designated for bass: arias, the role of Christ, and the brief parts of minor characters as well. I said to myself, "Oh, well, I'll simply have to alter the tone a bit for the different voices and would face in a different direction." That was sort of a challenge. The *Des Moines Register* covered "the first time that an important Bach work has been presented here" in an editorial (May 4, 1948) that included:

"Much of the inspiration of the evening came from the superb performance of the guest artist, Dr. Nelson Leonard of the University of Illinois, who sang the role of Jesus. His splendid voice, all-around musicianship, and complete understanding of the Passion music created the proper atmosphere for the oratorio."

Bruce Foote and I sang in Bach's "St. John's Passion" with the St. Louis Bach Festival Chorus and Orchestra under William Heyne in May of 1949. *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* was complimentary but got the two of us mixed up; however, *The Globe Democrat* had us properly sorted out:

"Nelson Leonard, a Christus whose clear and resonant voice projected a reverent dignity in that sacred role."

Katherine Bender of the Bach Festival Committee sent me a postcard (May 14, 1949), which I kept, saying:

"Last Saturday at the Board meeting, we all discussed you again and agreed on the beautiful quality of the work you did for us. On the recordings, as in performance, it is super!"

Lest you wonder whether I am not being carried away by my great (past) opinion of myself during those singing years, let me assure you that I am not. The quotations are all part of the profession, expected and useful. But they have to be good to help you obtain the next singing engagement. It is similar in baseball, where an umpire "is only as good as his last call."

What, no Handel's "Messiah"? Oh, yes, there was one in December, 1949, at Mississippi Southern College in Hattiesburg. This must have been a time of exultation because of the birth of Marcia in November. The statement in the Hattiesburg newspaper was most gracious and generous. I took it to be the result of Southern hospitality, but I did feel that it had been my best ever rendition of the bass recitatives and arias from that over-performed work. I turned down a later opportunity offered by my agent, Howard Will, to sing the "Messiah" in Cleveland. Was I becoming more sophisticated or was I just spoiled? I welcomed the opportunity of singing the bass role in the "Missa Solemnis" of Beethoven at the University of Illinois because I had never sung it before, but the most exciting opportunity came in singing the baritone solos in William Walton's "Belshazzar's Feast." There were three performances by the University of Illinois Choir with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Rafael Kubelik, the great conductor who came from

Czechoslovakia and eventually returned there: March 30, 1952, in Urbana-Champaign and April 3 and 4 in Orchestra Hall, Chicago. Nell heard the local performance; however, she was pregnant and could not journey to Chicago.

In "Belshazzar's Feast," the baritone has a musical "feast." In separate sections, he sings above the chorus, orchestra, and trumpet choir; then, in alternation with the chorus; and also, unaccompanied. In the longest unaccompanied section, the soloist describes the wonders of Babylon and all that it possesses. The rehearsals with the University Choir under the direction of Professor Paul Young were followed by the dress rehearsal with Kubelik in charge. After



NJL, publicity photo

I finished the unaccompanied baritone solo, "Babylon was a great city—," Kubelik called a halt to the rehearsal and asked me what I was thinking when I sang the long list of wonders. Reproduction of the words here makes the story easier to appreciate:

"Babylon was a great city. Her merchandise was of gold and silver, of precious stones, of pearls, of fine linen, purple, silk, and scarlet, all manner vessels of ivory, all manner vessels of most precious wood, of brass, iron and marble, cinnamon, odours and ointments, of frankincense, wine and oil, fine flour, wheat and beasts, sheep, horses, chariots, slaves, and the souls of men."

I replied that I started the list very slowly, to indicate what was considered important to the Babylonians, giving the audience time to listen and appreciate the carefully enunciated words. Then, I accelerated gradually and finished the phrasing rapidly with "and the souls of men"—almost a throw-away line. What did souls matter? Kubelik said something like the following: "Valid. An interesting interpretation. However, the audience may not see (hear?) it that way. You and I know that the souls of men are most important. Why not try it differently? Start with a faster listing of the merchandise and ritard gradually, slower and slower, with rests between, until you end most slowly—and sarcastically—with '—and the souls of men.' Then the audience will appreciate the contrast." I thought about it for a moment. The chorus and orchestra gave me an entry, and I did it in Kubelik's way. I knew immediately that it had been much more effective. Kubelik winked at me and continued directly with the music in hand. All three performances were terrific. It was exhilarating, exciting, and, now, memorable to have sung under Rafael Kubelik's direction. It was thrilling to hear the audience cheering after the second performance in Chicago. One year later, he directed a Chicago Symphony concert at the University of Illinois. I happened to be out of town, but Nell attended the concert and spoke to Kubelik afterward to congratulate him and to ask him whether he remembered the baritone, her husband, who had sung in "Belshazzar's Feast." She relayed his (approximate) answer, "Of course! I convinced that young man to sing the long unaccompanied passage my way. We had a great experience." I believe he kissed her.

The newspapers covering the performances indicated that of course the maestro had been correct:

1. "Impact of Walton's composition left the audience shaken and exhilarated. It was sung with fervor and

brilliance by the University Choristers, and was played by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the direction of Rafael Kubelik.

“NELSON LEONARD was in splendid voice as soloist in ‘Belshazzar’s Feast,’ showing up particularly well in a passage describing the fabled riches of Babylon from her precious jewels to ‘slaves, and the souls of men.’”

2. “William Walton’s ‘Belshazzar’s Feast’ received a rafter-ringing performance—The singers performed with precision and power. Leonard sang well and quite understandably—Kubelik, Leonard, and the others received an ovation.”
3. “Baritone Nelson Leonard, associate professor of chemistry, turned in a dramatic interpretation as soloist in the composition.”
4. “Soloist Nelson Leonard sang with excellent diction and resonance and coped successfully with most trying melodic intervals. Chorus was thoroughly prepared and sang with style and musical understanding.”
5. “Walton’s ‘Belshazzar’s Feast,’ a magnificent and heart-stirring version of the Biblical story, was made a wonderful vehicle of sound—mostly fortissimo sound—by the University Chorus and Kubelik’s orchestra with extra brass. The conductor deserves highest praise for the skill he disclosed in leading so large a group with such admirable results.”

There was an earlier recital that I had enjoyed almost as much as the Kubelik experience, probably because I sang with my old Lincoln College friend, Leigh Gerdine, who is an incomparable pianist and musician. Leigh had moved from Ohio to Missouri as Head of the Department of Music of Washington University in St. Louis, where we presented the sixth in a series of chamber music concerts, thereby fulfilling a promise we had made to ourselves a dozen years earlier. We practiced initially in Leigh’s small, temporary quarters and then in dress rehearsal, concert style, in a huge mansion belonging to potential donors to the Department of Music. On the night of the recital, February 6, 1951, there was a terrific blizzard. Only the performers, my coach LeRoy Hamp, and brave and venturesome subscribers attended. We behaved as though the chapel were full, but I

felt that I forced my voice somewhat in my eagerness to project. The St. Louis press was kind, however:

Nelson Leonard Gives Skilled Voice Recital at W.U.

A baritone with tones of unusual beauty in the higher and lower portions of its register was displayed last night when Nelson Leonard was presented in recital in Graham Chapel as the sixth in Washington University's season of eight chamber music offerings. It was the voice of a musician skilled and understanding, and it had the sustaining reinforcement of a subtle accompaniment by Leigh Gerdine at the piano.

The program was unconventional. Music not fashion interested the singer. A Brahms group, in which the "O Tod wie bitter" with its contrasting moods of approaching death was outstanding in its beauty. Then a group of Spanish songs, from troubadours of the time of Columbus, fascinating in the rhythmic interplay between piano and voice. A group to remember among treasured musical experiences.

Following four of Darius Milhaud's arrangements of popular Hebraic chants, a "Berceuse" outstanding Milhaud's modernism was hidden beneath the significance in the sad traditions of a race.

To conclude, a Russian group, Moussorgsky's "To the Little Star" sung in compelling beauty, his "The Goat," and two songs, "The Captive" and "Death" by Gretchaninoff.

An unusual program, which delighted both from that fact and from its beauty.—B.

My swan song in oratorio work came in a final production of Brahms' "Requiem," the work that had started me on this road. The date was December 4, 1955; the place, Smith Recital Hall of the School of Music, University of Illinois; the group, The Oratorio Society under the direction of Paul Young. The conductor and at least two of my good friends in the audience that night told me that they had learned something from my performance. In fact, they had detected what only I thought I knew. In Section III of the "Requiem," the baritone starts off with "Lord, make me to know the measure of my days on earth—," a solo I have always

loved. On that particular December 4th, I did not give it all the fire and depth it deserves, and I was not satisfied with myself. In Part VI, the baritone has another chance in “Lo, I unfold unto you a mystery—.” I resolved to exonerate myself, and I gave it all the mysteriousness, followed by as much excitement, that Brahms could have tolerated. I had gone from weakness to strength, and some people had detected what had been going on inside me. A very interesting evening.

In late April of 1955, I had decided to give up professional singing. I had been elected to the National Academy of Sciences. Nell had received a collect telephone call to this effect from my boss, Carl Marvel, who was attending the Academy meeting in Washington, D.C. When I walked home for lunch, I was met by Kenneth, rushing out of the door of 606 West Indiana, and calling, “Mommy says something awfully good has happened to you!” I remember the scene so vividly. I decided that if my fellow scientists thought I was doing my chemistry sufficiently well to join them in that august body, then I should concentrate on chemistry. I had had my fling in music. Moreover, when I returned from one or two singing weekends away that same year, Nell had asked the children, “Aren’t you going to greet your father?” Their answer, “Oh, has he been away?” provided a lesson and a warning that I had to heed. The family joke, provided by Nell, was more along the lines of “When Nelson received more for a chemistry lecture than he did for a singing engagement, he chose chemistry.”

“How much do you receive when you do solo work?” was a question Martial Singher and Paul Ulanovsky had asked after I had auditioned with them in the early 50s. The famous opera star and accompanist were on campus for a week of performance and coaching. At the urging of LeRoy Hamp and Grace Wilson, I had sung a group of baritone solos for them. Their opinion was that I could have a successful career in singing. However, they indicated that I would also have to sing opera, because “there was no fee for singing between the one I then received and ten times that figure—unless I sang opera.” It was too late even to contemplate that change. Singers can also teach to provide a living (but not for six). Leigh Gerdine sent me a letter stating that they needed a professor of voice at Washington University. Would I be interested in applying? Pleasant amusement! I quit singing cold turkey in 1955. The soloist mentality prevented me from singing in any chorus or choir and being satisfied with just that. Did I have any regrets? No, I had my beautiful experiences to remember. I would miss my musical friends, but I would gain chemistry friends. I would spend more time at home. The house would be quieter, because I *did* sing very loudly when I was practicing at home. Nell would

be relieved by my presence during the hectic hour from 5:30 p.m. to supper time. I would listen to more music and appreciate the work of others. I knew what the standards should be. No regrets! The breathing exercises and the projection of the voice helped keep me in shape for lecturing in chemistry for 40 more years, and the stage experience made me comfortable in any situation. Nell said that she was never nervous when I appeared on the stage, whether for music or chemistry. Fortunately, she was in the audience for only three chemistry lectures during our time together. Her general comment about each, "Too long."

Postscript

In February, 2002, the Chicago Symphony Orchestra published two CDs from their archives to celebrate Rafael Kubelik's conducting of 50 years earlier and to serve as a reward for a contribution (of \$65) to the Orchestra. By committee consultation, among the selections that they decided to include was "Belshazzar's Feast" of William Walton. The performers are listed, along with my photo taken at the time and the complete text of the oratorio. We distributed these CDs to family and to friends who might be interested in my brief musical "fame" of half a century earlier. The most enthusiastic response came in an e-mail from Professor E. J. Corey of Harvard University (Nobel Laureate, 1990), who had been a younger colleague of mine in chemistry at the University of Illinois in the 1950s. I quote:

Dear Nelson:

It seems like magic. Here I sit at my office desk listening to your performance in Smith Hall 50 years ago that I remember so well. It still sounds as good as I remember it being, which was really excellent. The CD recording also sounds very fine on my office audio. Thanks so much for the incredible gift and a spectacular piece of our shared past. Claire and I will listen at home tonight together.

Just by chance WGBH, our local FM station, has been playing a lot of Walton recently (he was born 100 years ago, 1902), and last week played Belshazzar's Feast. Of course it reminded me of you, but I never dreamed that I would hear you sing it again. We both have a link of sorts with Walton, since he also received an honorary Doctorate from Oxford.

It is also nice to have the Kubelik Tribute. I remember going to hear him conduct the University of Illinois Symphony Orchestra in 1951 with great pieces by Janacek and Hindemith.

Please give my best regards to Peggy. With all good wishes.

*Cordially,
E J*

Second Postscript

Shortly after the CD “From the Archives” was issued by the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, I received a package in the mail from an unknown donor; that is, unknown to me. It came from Brian Hill, Manager of Copyrights and Promotion of the Music Department, Oxford University Press in New York. The package contained a deluxe *conductor’s score* of Walton’s “Belshazzar’s Feast, a copy of “William Walton, The Romantic Loner” by Humphrey Burton and Maureen Murray, and “Walton, A Celebration—2002,” which was a comprehensive guide to Walton at the centenary of his birth. I had to ask Mr. Hill why I had received such a generous and thoughtful gift, and had he been the gracious donor. Yes, indeed, he had, because I permitted the release of the 1952 recording to serve as a means of donating to the Symphony. Since Oxford Press owned the copyright to the work, they also permitted the release. Mr. Hill felt that these actions put us in the same category. I am sure Oxford Press was surrendering real money, which made their gift to me even more appreciated. You can be sure that I responded warmly to Brian Hill.